

Sixthly, some hard re-thinking is necessary about the role of foreign aid and of innovative ways of bringing the external transactions of the country into a more stable position. If it cannot be brought to a situation of balance, then at least the deficit should be brought down to a tolerable level in the sense of being able to manage without getting deeper into foreign debt. The policy of currency depreciation has proved itself to be ineffective in carrying out this task. Various instruments other than those forming part of a typical structural adjustment/stabilisation package are available to any government to achieve this objective.

Seventhly, economic processes and politics appear to be often pulling in different directions. A tendency can be found in many countries with developed mass political processes — Sri Lanka clearly being one such country — to increasingly replace the allocation mechanism

represented by market forces with a political mechanism of allocation. Whatever its benefits (to some) in the short run, this mechanism has not been very conducive to the promotion of accumulation, growth and human development in the long run. Along with this, one often notes a lack of correspondence between argument and action, leading to the credibility of political leaders and economic managers being questioned. Often measures which require rigorous decision making and implementation are diluted by a populist approach to policy making. The characteristics of the Sri Lankan socio-political situation which brought about this situation have been enumerated earlier; the numerous social welfare policies in the country, which were their result, have had a serious impact on people's mentality, creating the expectation that the state will be paternalistic and will ensure the provision of basic needs and so on.

There are over 600,000 internally dispersed persons in refuge camps run by the state. Most of them have been there for over three years, leading a life of utter deprivation. We publish below a report prepared by INFORM, a human rights watch group in Colombo, on refugees in Trincomalee, Vavunia and Puttalam.

INFORM FIELD REPORT ON REFUGEES

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Visiting Trincomalee once again brings to the surface the range of disturbing issues with regard to the internally displaced. Since June 1990, hundreds of thousands of Sri Lankans, especially rural agricultural workers, from the north and east have lived on miserly hand-outs from the state, housed in grim camps, euphemistically referred to as 'welfare centres' in official jargon.

They have been the real 'pawns' in the war game; for almost three years they have lived like nomads, with no space to call their own. As citizens of Sri Lanka, they do not enjoy the benefits of health and other welfare systems that others in the country enjoy. Children do not receive an adequate education. Families are forced to co-exist with one another in the most appalling of conditions, with no privacy, minimum sanitation and constant fear of harassment.

These Sri Lankan men and women are treated with scant respect and dignity, deprived of a means to earn their

living, forced to accept beggarly hand-outs, forced to swallow their sense of self in order to survive.

There are 18,533 displaced persons living in welfare centres scattered throughout the Trincomalee area, as well as another 15,207 drawing dry rations but residing outside the camps. There are also a fair number of returnees from Tamilnadu who have been unable to return to their homes as yet.

The pressure is on, in Trincomalee, for displaced persons to return to their homes, and various resettlement projects are under way — for example in Mutur and along the north-bound coastal road up to Nilaveli. The official position is that families are entitled to receive a settling-in allowance of Rs. 2000, a grant of Rs. 500 for the purchase of cadjans for roofing, a productive enterprises grant of Rs. 4000 and a further block grant of Rs. 15,000 for re-building their homes. However, we faced many complaints that these amounts were not being paid out on schedule, with officials offering such ridiculous excuses as not having the 'pink' forms in stock and so on!

We also discovered a process in motion that seemed to have quite disturbing implications. The plight of some villagers of Periyakulama, a large village off the main road to Nilaveli, is a case in point. Residents of Periyakulama were moved out of welfare centres on the basis that they were being re-settled; they were then moved into the vicinity of their former homes, and accommodated in temporary huts; they are not permitted to go back to their original land because the military says it is still an 'uncleared' area. So on record these people are re-settled and off the books; in actual fact, they are still displaced in every real sense of the word.

This situation is further complicated when the returnees from South India are at the receiving end. Over 20,000 Sri Lankan Tamils who had fled to Tamilnadu in South India since the outbreak of the most recent phase of the war in the north-east in June 1990 have returned to the island in the nine months between January and September 1992. They arrived in Trincomalee by air and sea, and were accommodated initially in 'transit' camps before being moved to other locations. Some of them returned to their homes; others are still stuck in welfare centres.

Once again, we face a tricky question as to the categorisation of these persons. When they move out of the 'transit' camps, do they join the ranks of the 'internally displaced' and stop being 'returnees'? Semantic questions, but ones that can change the day to day life of thousands of men, women and children.

More than any other question, the issue of who is responsible for these people who returned from India is a bothersome one. Upto the time of our visit to Trincomalee, we had been under the impression that the repatriation was taking place under the supervision of the UNHCR and that therefore the UNHCR was assuming the primary responsibility for the returnees. However, in Trincomalee, it seems that the UNHCR is only assuming responsibility for those who are to return in the future, not for those who are already in the island.

We talked to many of these persons, people who had fled from their villages to the local camps as well as people who had travelled all the way to India and back in the last three years. Their stories were varied, yet similar. Each one spoke of the feelings of terror and insecurity that compelled them to leave; each one had a harrowing tale of the loss of loved ones and property, loss of a whole way of life.

S. Santhanam is originally from Galle, but had married and settled down in Sambaltivu. He ran a small shop where he bought and sold gunny bags. He recalls that after the IPKF pulled out of Trincomalee in 1989, there came a time when the LTTE began skirmishing with the security forces; he says that they were then asked to leave their village by the military. The villagers trekked to Thiriyai, then to a Mill which was hit by a mortar that

caused the death of several persons taking shelter there, and then to several more camps. Today, he lives in the St. Joseph's Camp in Nilaveli, along with 300 other families.

Arunasalam Murugesu is from Kumburupiddy, a small town north of Trincomalee, on the coast road. He now lives in a camp in Nilaveli with his daughter and a grandson. He says they left their village in 1990 out of fear; this is a story one hears repeatedly, that many people fled their homes not because of a direct attack but because of incidents in the vicinity that led them to fear for their safety if they remained.

Murugesu's family walked to Mullaitivu, further north; from there they took a lorry to Mannar and a boat to Rameshwaram in India. They lived in camps in Tamilnadu, in Thirumangalam and Uchchapiddy and Mandalam, before being sent back to Sri Lanka in 1992. Murugesu says he felt pressured to return by the attitude of the Indian authorities; he complained that they were merely told to pack their bags to be re-located and then ended up on a lorry that brought them to the dock in Madras where they were put on a ship to Trincomalee. He has a son in Mullaitivu, he says. But he simply cannot get there. Given the present situation, Murugesu would have to go from Trincomalee to Habarana, from there to Anuradhapura, then to Vavuniya and then see how he could proceed.....he says he is too old and weak now to even attempt such a journey.

At the Clappenberg camp, we meet hundreds of people from the area who have been living in a number of storage hangars that have been abandoned for many years - until they became home to people from the surrounding areas who fled the war.

The people speak to us about the bad conditions in the camps, the lack of water and adequate sanitation facilities, the fact that they do not even receive the rations they are entitled to most of the time, the poor quality of the schools their children must attend.

But most of all they speak to us about the sense of insecurity that pervades their lives. There have been occasions on which all the residents in a camp have been subjected to intensive interrogation - on one occasion, the residents of the Uppuveli camp told us that they had to stand in the blazing sun, on the beach, for over five hours one morning without being allowed to have a drink of water or to go to the toilet. At the Kasipillai camp a few months ago three returnee families had been singled out for interrogation and even the women in these families had been assaulted.

Several residents in the camp also complained of a particular phenomenon - that they were being used as 'forced labour' by the security forces, for example, to construct bunkers or to do other small jobs in the camps and sentry points in the area.



There were also cases of disappearances reported from the camps from the 1990s which have not yet been resolved. Among those that were brought to our attention was that of Doraiswamy Subramaniam, from Pahalanthuwa who was abducted from St. Joseph's Camp in Nilaveli on the 6th of July 1990 and has not been heard of since.

Village in the Hangar

In June 1990, over 125 families from Kappalthurai, a small village in the Trincomalee District, fled their homes. The village was caught in a crossfire between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan armed forces, and everyone ran, helter skelter; most of them ended up in the nearest large village, which was Thampalagamam. From there, they moved around from welfare centre to welfare centre, and finally ended up at the Clappenberg Camp.

Clappenberg was built as a storage point for goods unloaded at the Trincomalee harbour during the days of the 'second world war'. It consists of a large number of hangars built out of corrugated iron, each capable of holding 10,000 tonnes, and each approximately 90 feet by 210 feet in size.

Most of the hangars are shaped like rabbit hutches, curved like a bow, with no windows or ventilation at all. A few that were built in more recent times have been built half way with brick and cement and are roofed in corrugated iron. Some of these have a row of windows situated almost along the roof, which let in a little light but no air.

For almost three years now, the people of Kappalthurai have called one particular rabbit hutch hangar their home. Inside, it takes quite a while for your eyes to get accustomed to the gloom. Then one begins to see the improvised partitions with which each family marks out its own territory; branches of trees make four improvised corner poles and old sarees, gunny bags, tattered mats make the walls of an enclosure which on average is about 10 x 10 feet.

In this space men, women and children live together, eat, sleep and hope for a better tomorrow when they can go back to their homes. Of course, the villagers are no longer sure that their village exists - nor do they have any idea as to when they can go back. The army still says their village is in an 'uncleared' area and so they cannot be allowed to return.

In the hangar, each little enclosure testifies to the efforts of the people, in particular the women, to maintain some semblance of 'normalcy' in the midst of this environment of despair and deprivation.

In one, you find some plastic flowers in a vase before brightly coloured pictures of the Hindu deities; in

another, a large battery operated wall clock of Japanese make ticks away the time. Framed photographs of family members are perched on a cardboard box, people frozen in a better time, smiling and posing against painted backdrops of waterfalls that were all the rage then in provincial town studios.

In one enclosure, a puberty ceremony was in progress; the girl, now the focus of attention, sat under a canopy decorated with little X'mas-tree lights that flashed on an off in tune to some unheard rhythm, enthroned in her moment of glory. Her proud and smiling mother welcomed us in, happy to have a set of visitors from outside on such an auspicious day.

The women smiled at us, the children practised their English — 'hello' and 'goodbye' being the main elements of their vocabulary. The men spoke to us about the hardships they faced; common tales of inadequate rations, shortages of water and sanitation facilities, the inability to find any form of employment outside the camp, the security considerations, the harassment by members of the state security forces and by various armed para-military groups, the paucity of medical facilities, the perennial outbreaks of disease, the poor standard of education for the children.

Even though one has heard the same story a hundred times, from displaced people belonging to all ethnic groups, in all parts of the island, each time it is as difficult to listen to as it was the first time. One is overcome by feelings that are a combination of guilt and complicity in this unjust system; although it has been almost three years since hundreds of thousands of Sri Lankans from the north and east, Tamil, Muslim and Sinhala, fell into this situation, there is little public awareness of the extent of the problem.

The state agencies dealing with relief and rehabilitation carry on under mechanisms that were devised many years ago to deal with victims of 'temporary' displacement caused by flood, landslide or some such natural disaster. There seems to be minimal coordination between the military in the north and east, who are responsible for the safety and security of these people, and the state agencies supposedly responsible for the welfare of displaced persons or persons who are about to be displaced due to the intensification of the conflict.

Large international NGOs and relief agencies working in the north and east walk an uneasy tightrope between the security forces, the armed Tamil groups that support the military in some of the so-called 'cleared' areas, government bureaucrats and armed militants of the LTTE.

Among the many diverse problems one faces when one considers the issue of internal displacement, a major one is that of providing adequate security for these people. While on the one hand they are being encouraged to go



back to their villages on the basis that 'normalcy' has been restored, in fact the security forces do not permit them to enter certain areas, for example, villagers of Periyakulam which is on the main road north from Trincomalee to Nilaveli, have been not permitted to enter certain parts of their own land despite having gone down on record as being 're-settled'.

On the other hand, the facilities and support provided for them, citizens of this country, are grossly inadequate; the basic health and education facilities that all Sri Lankans are entitled to are not theirs, even though they live in close proximity to a major provincial town, Trincomalee, that recently hosted a Presidential Mobile Secretariat. Particularly considering the fact that they have lived under the most abominable conditions for almost three years now, and considering that even in the event of an immediate settlement of the conflict in the north and east, many of them would be unable to return to their villages right away, it seems only natural to ask why it is that these persons cannot be treated with the ordinary human dignity that is the due of every man, woman and child on this earth.

The conditions of life of the internally displaced, who number over 600,000 persons at the very least, are indeed shameful and every one should accept his or her responsibility for permitting such a social anomaly to exist in our country.

People of Morawewa - Ten Years of A Nomadic Existence

We talked to people from the Mora Wewa area in Trincomalee District who are now living in a welfare centre set up by the state at a half-built Technical College in Trincomalee.

Among those we spoke to was Ratnasingham Suppiah, from Pankulama in the Mora Wewa area. Suppiah says they abandoned their home for the last time in August of 1990, after they were caught in a cross-fire between the LTTE and the security forces. Many of the people in their village walked the entire distance to Mannar; it took them six weeks, travelling slowly, through jungle. From Mannar they took a boat to Rameshwaram, and then spent the time until their return in May 1992 in a camp in Thindugal, Tamilnadu.

47 families from Pankulama returned to Sri Lanka on the same day, by air. They were accommodated in a transit camp for three days and then brought to where they are now - a half built building intended to be a Technical College, in Uppuveli. There are no doors and windows, no plaster on the walls, hardly enough space or sanitary facilities for the number of persons living there. There was an epidemic of fever raging in the camp, which was

identified as being water-borne, and which seemed to be beyond control.

The conversation took another turn when Suppiah becomes less suspicious of us. He told us that since 1983 they have never lived in their village for more than six months at a time. Their area has been the site of constant skirmishes and conflicts between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan security forces, and the villagers have fled their homes time and again over the past ten years.

He speaks fluent Sinhala, and talks of the close contacts with Sinhala villagers in their neighbourhood; there is no sense of hostility in his voice, in fact he wonders what has happened to the Sinhala villagers in the area by now because he knows that they too were caught up in the same situation.

The experiences of these villagers from Mora Wewa are particularly bizarre. In 1983, their village was set on fire in the aftermath of a clash between the LTTE and the security forces in the area; they fled their homes and lived in a number of welfare centres in the area for a short time. Then, they were dispatched to Nuwara Eliya, where they were put to work on the plantations. The climate did not agree with them, they were not familiar with the work, they could not fit into the plantation lifestyle. Within months, they returned to their village, where they began farming their fields, until the next incident broke out and they fled again. This cycle of running away and coming back went on through the next years until 1990, when they ended up in India.

As he speaks, other villagers from Pankulama join in, Tamils speaking in Sinhala, telling us of the many aspects of their nomadic existence of the past ten years.

One man, tears in his eyes, says 'My son was 6 months old when we ran away from the village for the first time - in 1983. Now he is eleven years old. He doesn't know what a home is, what family life is, what a community is. What kind of people are we bringing up in this country?' And we are left speechless.

Vavuniya

Next we met Fr. Devasagayam and a lorry driver who often visits refugee camps in Madhu and Vavuniya. According to him nearly 30-35,000 refugees are in Madhu camp which spreads around 20 acres. In the camp there are internally displaced people as well as returnees from India. The refugees who have returned from India are very few and are not allowed to go to uncleared areas.

These are some of the facts that we gathered about the Madhu Camp from persons we met and talked to in



Vavuniya. We had no opportunity of visiting the camp run by the UNHCR.

Once a month refugees are provided with dry rations. However sometimes there is delay in the arrival of food supplies, mainly due to military operations in the area and to the curfews which are intermittently imposed to pave the way for military actions. Delaya can mean days of hunger.

Government servants who are living in the camps get their salaries even though they do not attend work. So they are financially in a better position than the others. In this situation others are also looking for any avenues to gain an extra income so that they could satisfy their other needs. Except for those who worked in agriculture, others are in a position to engage in their professions as carpenters, fishermen, masons, labourers etc. Unfortunately they cannot do so for the fear of their names being deleted from the list of displaced persons. However some fishermen are understood to be doing their job in secret and in collaboration with the fishermen at the closest beach.

At least two doctors and nurses are always available for medical treatment. These doctors are from UNHCR, Red Cross and MSF. However, the ICRC and MSF have withdrawn their activities from Mannar camp in early this year. One reason for this, according to Fr. Devasagayam, is that the MSF and ICRC doctors were unhappy about the government's attitude towards them and the other reason is that the government wanted to bring Pakistani doctors to replace MSF and ICRC.

The Madhu Camp is an Open Relief Centre administered by the UNHCR. Neither the LTTE nor government authorities interfere in the internal management. However the LTTEs have access to the camps while government forces do not, because the immediate vicinity of the camp premises are completely dominated by the LTTEs. Even political meetings are held by the LTTEs outside the camp premises and refugees have to attend these meetings for fear of possible latter harrassment. People in the camps think that both contending parties are not interested in settling them back in their own villages. In this context people want UNHCR and Red Cross to be there permanently.

Puttalam

In Puttalam, there are 139 camps and 8,000 families housed in them numbering over 47,000 persons. All the refugees are Muslims from Jaffna, Mannar,

Vavuniya, Kilinochchi and Mullativu districts. All these people belong to the Northern province and speak Tamil only.

These displaced people are undergoing untold difficulties. They depend purely on the dry rations worth Rs.1000 given monthly to a family. These camps which are c adjan huts are set up on private lands which are also usually in a very unhealthy environment, though there are thousands of acres of unutilised land in the area. Not a single camp is run by the government. All their needs such as shelter, health, clothing, education, income generation and recreation are met with the assistance of NGOs such as ACFOD, IRED, OXFAM, FORUT, UNICEF and Italian Cooperation. UNICEF and MSF are involved in training 32 health workers who are selected by the Rural Development Foundation (RDF) to work voluntarily at refugee camps. Medicine is supplied by SIDA. Seminars are also conducted for these volunteers fortnightly with the help of government and private doctors.

Among the refugees are 700 widows, whose husbands were killed or abducted by the militants or died in the course of the conflict.

Each camp has a women's committee with 11 members. RDF women coordinators go to these committees to discuss their problems; RDF is introducing some income generation projects for refugee women, and has organised 35 pre-schools at refugee camps covering the age limits 3-5 years.

Conflicts with Local People

Initially the local population welcomed the refugees. However, general resentment surfaced later because some refugees began to engage in casual work in the area at a very low wage, sometimes as low as half of the normal payment. Local people who are unemployed saw this as a threat to their opportunity to find jobs; local residents who had at first given their land for temporary housing for the refugees began to ask for their land back.

In recent months, open conflict had broken out between locals and refugees over employment and other issues. For instance, six months ago, a labourer from a refugee camp was very badly beaten by the local people and two months ago there was a commotion in a camp over a friendship between a local boy and a refugee girl. Angry local people had burnt this refugee camp and over 500 refugees left after this incident.